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Background Briefing, 15 Apr. 1990

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Article No: _____

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TITLE: East Timor: 'an island of fear.'

SPEAKERS: Shirley SHACKLETON - Widow of Australian Journalist killed in Timor; Senator Hon Gareth EVANS, QC (ALP, Vic) - Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade; Mark BAKER - Journalist, Sunday Herald, Melbourne; Benny MURDANI - Minister of Defence and Security, Indonesia; Andrew McMILLAN - Author; Rt Rev Paul MOORE - retired Episcopal Bishop of New York; Peter PHILP - Editor, Catholic Advocate, Melbourne; Sasha STEFAN - Tutor in Politics, Monash University; Abel GUTTERAS - Spokesperson for Timorese.

REPORTERS: Mark AARONS; Tony WALKER.

ENRICHMENT:

PRESENTER: This week, Mark Aarons presents 'East Timor, an island of fear'.

BENNY MURDANI: Don't dream there will be a nation called Irian or Ambon, or a nation called East Timor - there won't be. In the past, there were small states which wanted to be independent but without a moment's thought, the Indonesian Government prevented this from happening.

MARK AARONS: General Benny Murdani laying down the law to East Timorese officials during a recent visit to Dili.

BENNY MURDANI: Whether it's those people who've gone to the mountains, who are called Fretilin; or the people who are here now, or anywhere in East Timor, any attempt to free East Timor from Indonesia will be firmly dealt with.

MARK AARONS: Twelve months earlier, the Indonesian Defence Minister thought that thirteen years of ruthless military occupation had tamed the Timorese, so early last year the country was partially opened, after years of almost total isolation. But the conquered Timorese have seized every chance to convey the truth to the outside world. It's a very different picture from Jakarta's sanitised version.

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SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: There are two entirely different experiences there. One is in Dili, which is like Disneyland. It's beautifully stage managed, the streets are clean, the houses look nice. People even look rather happy. The whole atmosphere there, if all you did was go into Dili, would be to think, ah, things are a lot better than I thought.

MARK AARONS: But behind the sparkling facade of Dili's tourist resorts, there's a world of fear and violence.

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: If however, they go a little further afield - for instance, I went down to Baucau and Lospalos, which is right into the war area - and what struck me was the climate of fear.

MARK AARONS: Shirley Shackleton's husband, Greg, was an early casualty of Indonesian aggression, one of six Australian journalists murdered in East Timor in 1975. Fourteen years later, the killing goes on.

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: Many many people said to me, people die here every day. The fear of the people telling me that was absolutely genuine, believe me. Everything I did was conducted in secrecy, in a room with no windows, and if there was the slightest sound, the person I was talking to would jump, jump.

MARK AARONS: Up to 200,000 Timorese have died in the last fifteen years, perhaps a third of the 1975 population. They were killed in Indonesian military operations, or starved to death in the resulting famine. Official Australian policy has hardly been exemplary. In the mid-1970s, Gough Whitlam's Labor Government tacitly encouraged Jakarta to take over the Portuguese colony. When resistance by the nationalist Fretilin forces subsided in the late 1970s, Malcolm Fraser's Government formally recognised Indonesia's annexation of the territory. Bob Hawke's Government then reaffirmed this decision. Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, explains government policy.

GARETH EVANS: Well, it's not so much a moral argument, it's a matter of recognising reality. We were as distressed as any other country in the world, as any group of people in the world, at the circumstances of the takeover in East Timor in 1975. That was wholly indefensible. The passage of time doesn't make it any less defensible. We wish that it hadn't happened, but it did. We believe it's irreversible. That's the view of just about every other country in the world, I think at the moment, and it's wholly unrealistic, I think, to believe that one can further advance the aspirations of the East Timorese people by trying to keep alive a claim to self determination, to independence, which is simply not going to be realised in the real world.

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MARK AARONS: Why do you think then, Senator Evans, that Australia is alone amongst our western allies, in recognising this incorporation?

GARETH EVANS: Well, I am not sure that we are alone among our western allies. It's true, it is, that some of the members of the European Community have seen a greater loyalty to their Portuguese colleagues than to the realities of the situation on the ground, but it's simply not the case that Australia is as lonely or isolated in taking this particular view of the reality of Indonesian sovereignty.

MARK AARONS: Who are the other countries that have recognised it, de jure?

GARETH EVANS: I can't recall them off-hand and I am not in a position to give you a sort of a detailed list right now, but there's plenty of them, not least the United States, in my recollection.

MARK AARONS: Senator Gareth Evans. Australia's formal or de jure recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor is in fact, not matched by either the United States or any of our western allies. Most do accept the fact of Jakarta's rule, but in line with international undertakings, refuse to recognise territory seized illegally and by force. Senator Evans also believes that Indonesian rule has recently improved in East Timor but many visitors speak of continuing brutal repression, especially since a series of pro-independence demonstrations began six months ago. The Melbourne Sunday Herald's Mark Baker was the most recent reporter to visit the country.

MARK BAKER: The overwhelming development, I guess, that I saw there was the great increase in activity by young students and young people generally in Dili, which appears to have begun around the time of the Pope's visit, of course, with that demonstration during the Pope's visit. And since then, there have been a number of major demonstrations and incidents around Dili and everyone that I spoke to while I was there, was talking about this new phenomenon and this new militancy really, amongst young Timorese people. I spoke to several youths who had been arrested and detained as a result of their activity, during the Pope's visit in particular, that demonstration at the Papal Mass near Dili. The main young man that I spoke to had in fact, after this demonstration, had sought sanctuary for some weeks in the residence of the Catholic Bishop, Bishop Belo, in Dili, and subsequent to that, after some efforts, the military were able to get a number of those youths out and some of them, I believe up to thirty or so, were held for varying periods.

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This particular young man was held in custody for over two months and he told me in quite graphic detail, stories of abuse and torture and deprivation, during that period. In his particular case, he said that electric shocks had been used on his body, his body had been doused in water and then electric shocks had been administered to the nipples. He said that he had been beaten with rifle butts. He said his back had been slashed and showed me some scars where his back had been slashed with what he said were bayonets. He said that he had been held in a bath of what he described as filthy water for a period of twenty four hours or so. He said they had been held in sort of solitary conditions. He said that they had been deprived of food for long periods and when food was provided, it was, as he described it, animal food and he said, he came out of his period in detention in a very weak state. He said he couldn't walk for more than a week and he said it took him a long time to recover.

MARK AARONS: But despite this brutal response, another nationalist demonstration was staged in mid-January, during the visit of the American Ambassador to Indonesia. It was witnessed by Andrew McMillan, who told his story to PM's Tony Walker.

ANDREW McMILLAN: We were sitting in the beer garden at the Hotel Turismo on the beachfront at Dili. The Ambassador's party arrived and a couple of minutes later, about eighty to a hundred students stormed into the hotel and onto the balcony of the hotel, where the Ambassador was staying. Many of them were wearing facial masks to keep their identity secret. The US Ambassador came out a few minutes later from the foyer of the hotel and stood listening to these student leaders as they aired their grievances. He was given a police megaphone to respond to them.

TONY WALKER: What happened after the US Ambassador left the Turismo Hotel?

ANDREW McMILLAN: As the Ambassador's car got about fifty metres away, riot police moved in from both sides of the hotel onto the street and they pushed the students into a human pile and beat them with the butts of M16 rifles and with batons. Those students who tried to escape were also beaten with rifles and kicked by soldiers. Some officers came in and told the police to move back because there were foreigners watching what was happening. The students in the pile, they were covered in blood, there were bloodied sandshoes and thongs all over the street, plainclothes police coming in, tipping sand over the blood on the street. The students at that stage, broke into prayer and then moved off to the Bishop's house.

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ABEL GUTTERAS: After its invasion in 1975, the Indonesians were aiming to educate the young generation of East Timorese to love Indonesia and to know the five principles of the Indonesian State ideology - and that is love, peace and human rights, and so forth - but in the practice, it shows totally the contrary of what they teach at the schools. Because of this, the students they only learn that to be an Indonesian means to kill; to be an Indonesian means to rape; to be an Indonesian is to have no respect for other. And so all these violent activities that have been imposed on the East Timorese have sort of created the radicalism in the young students.

MARK AARONS: Abel Gutteras, pro-independence leader in Melbourne.

Many visitors have recently observed the reality of Jakarta's rule. The Right Reverend Paul Moore tells a fairly typical story. Recently retired as Episcopal Bishop of New York, Moore was particularly intimidated by the numerous roadblocks he encountered.

PAUL MOORE: One felt pretty threatened. They had rifles and automatic weapons on their shoulders. We'd been by truckload after truckload of troops travelling on one way or the other. We went by a tank park where there were at least a dozen heavy armoured vehicles. It was an occupied part of the world and when you looked out on either side and saw these pathetic peasants in their huts with their roosters and chickens, hardly with enough to eat; women carrying buckets on their heads, down long hot open roads; you thought what on earth are these tanks doing here. It was bizarre.

PETER PHILP: Unless you were prepared to scratch the surface a bit, you could go into East Timor at the time of the Pope's visit and say, well, what's all the hullabaloo about. It seems to be a normal situation with certainly an occupying power, but they appear to have changed the situation there for the better.

MARK AARONS: Peter Philp, editor of the Melbourne Catholic Advocate.

PETER PHILP: When you wanted to meet people who had a slightly different opinion to the official line, one had to meet them in extraordinary circumstances. I mean, I met people on bus stops or at the back of churches, and then I was led into other places, simply to sit down to talk because the situation is far from normal. Once you got a little bit of dialogue going with waiters at a hotel, they would gradually begin to tell you their story and the fact that it was very dangerous, that they had suffered, and the situation hadn't changed. You met priests that I have the highest regard for, who were very nervous about meeting you at certain locations.

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And it didn't take me very long to realise that in fact, rather than dealing with a crude regime as I have met in other third world countries, I was dealing with a very sophisticated machine, that in fact had not changed. There is a point of view in East Timor that says yes, in the 1970s, the abuse of human rights were bad and we don't agree with that, but that's all changed. It didn't take me long to realise when you started to talk to Timorese people, and they started to tell you their stories, it wasn't in past tense, the fact they were still terribly frightened because of this very sophisticated security network that was watching every move they made.

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: So, on my very first day, when I pulled up at this first checkpoint, what I did was watch. Another bus was coming in the opposite direction and all those people were told to get out - obviously they're used to it. They got out and I could see that as the soldiers and the police walked amongst the women, they all cringed as if they were going to be hit. And I just sat there and said, if I get thrown out tomorrow, really, it's been worth coming to see that because these were just Timorese people coming in to Dili, probably to sell a few tomatoes or something that they'd grown at the side of their house. And I saw that just the attitude of those soldiers and they walked along there as if they were, well, jackbooted, not to put too fine a point on it. All the time in East Timor, I kept thinking, this is like Germany must have been, you know, people wielding their little power on helpless other people who have none at all.

MARK AARONS: Can you say a little bit more about what it's like to travel in East Timor?

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: Remember that I was there when the Pope was imminently coming, so there could have been more roadblocks than usual. I really can't say, but the fact that they can't travel in their own country comes from other things too. For instance, in order to travel almost anywhere, you've got to have a travel pass. Now, it doesn't cost you any money but in order to be eligible for a travel pass, you've got to have your identification papers up to date and that costs money. Very few people have the money to have their identification papers up to date, so very few people can get a travel pass. In the old days, they all had ponies, there were hundreds of thousands of ponies in East Timor. Guess how many I counted, and believe me, I searched. I saw eleven Timor ponies. The rest were bombed, as they told me. They were killed in the awful bombing that that country took, or they were eaten. So, people who used to have transport now have absolutely none.

MARK AARONS: Shirley Shackleton. Many Timorese claim that these restrictions are part of a wider apparatus of repression. Abel Guterras.

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ABEL GUTTERAS: Concentration camps means for East Timorese, is that people are herded into these, what the Indonesians term as strategic hamlets. Now these people are concentrated into these small areas and of course, they are guarded by the military day and night, and their movement is very limited. They cannot go beyond five kilometres radius from the camp. If they do, of course then they are killed. Because of this restriction, we call it concentration camps because people no longer live as they used to, pre-Indonesian invasion. In my village, for example, we used to be free, people used to be free to go anywhere they liked - to go to tend their gardens, to work in the rice fields, for example, but now those things don't exist. People are concentrated into these areas to .. I mean, mainly for the military purposes, to prevent the population from mixing or having any contact with the guerilla resistance. Apart from that, there are a lot of .. for example, people die of disease, hunger - there's no food, and most of the times when the military operations are going, these people are .. their restrictions is really tight and that they cannot go into the bush to forage for edible foods.

MARK AARONS: However, Senator Gareth Evans is optimistic that the situation is improving.

GARETH EVANS: People are being killed in the context of the continued Fretilin insurgency and it is the case that we believe that something over forty people have been killed in one way or the other, in the basis of various confrontations with the military regime, with the authorities, in the last year. I simply want to make the point that while abuses are occurring and whenever they do occur, we make quite strong representations to the Indonesian Government about them but, at the same time, there are many claims of abuse which are made, which prove not to be well founded, and it is important to be able to separate them out and get a fair and balanced and accurate reading of the situation.

We are now getting quite regular access by senior diplomatic personnel to East Timor and are able to explore much more thoroughly and systematically, these claims than was the case in the past, and I can assure you that our voice is not in the slightest bit muted whenever we do get evidence that things have been crook. And our general assessment of the situation however, is that overall, over the passage of time, things have been generally improving and that these essentially remain sporadic outbursts or episodes of maladministration, rather than a continuing course of serious brutal oppression of the kind that you seem to prefer to describe it. So we do have some sense of optimism about the future of the province and the way in which things are gradually improving, over time, under the kind of pressure that we, among other countries, are putting on the Indonesians.

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MARK AARONS: It's generally believed that there's been little military activity in East Timor in recent years, but it's admitted that at least forty Timorese have died in the past year in military clashes. The resistance claims Indonesian casualties in the same period were several hundred, and recent visitors have also reported evidence of significant Indonesian losses.

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: I made friends with some soldiers who came to the hotel I was staying at and they said they'd had a very bad time, they'd just lost eight of their best friends to the resistance. And I said, what, so in what way? And they said, oh, well, we have to fight them all the time. I mean, they're very very ... you know, from the actual soldiers I learned a great deal. Now, interestingly, I'd made inquiries at a highly official ... I heard that eight of your people died last week down in Lospalos. And I was told, oh, no, no, no, no, no, only Timorese died, we didn't lose anybody. Primitives, they're primitives, they're bandits - that's the official story. Now, when I went down to Lospalos, I asked to be taken to the heroes' graveyard where the Indonesians are buried and there were eight fresh graves. So I suspect that the eight I had been told about was not a fib and not a lie by the soldiers, but someone else was rather fibbing.

Also, while I was sleeping in Lospalos, there was a big battle an hour away and we heard in the morning, it was all the talk around the town, that an Indonesian soldier had been killed. As we were passing that graveyard, the driver said to me - a little car went past - and he said, there is the Indonesian who is about to be buried into the grave. Now, when we got back to Dili, we were told that only a Fretilin died that night, and for once, we were able to say, what was he doing being buried in the Indonesian heroes' cemetery. End of conversation. We also saw, I think it was something like fourteen trucks, soldiers standing, packed in like sardines, armed to the teeth, looking really tired. They were coming back, they were coming back from that battle so I mean, those sorts of things make me think it's not just a few bandits.

MARK BAKER: I was told a number of stories indicating that there had been a heightened level of military activity since late last year, November, December. There were a couple more people buried the week that I was in Dili, there were a couple more soldiers buried in the military cemetery in Dili, and I heard reports of a number of engagements that month that had led to deaths and casualties on the army side. But certainly, everyone is saying that the fighting is continuing. I mean, it's low level but it is continuing and it's certainly not going away.

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MARK AARONS: Mark Baker. According to Abel Gutteras, the resistance, although heavily outnumbered, pursues a classic campaign of guerilla warfare.

ABEL GUTTERAS: The bigger the number the enemy troop is, the smaller the guerilla force becomes, which means that if they are facing say 20,000 troops then they will break themselves into four, five men, each group to operate within certain areas and to hit and run. For example, during the encirclement and annihilation campaigns in the past, the guerilla forces have operated very successfully against that, which means that they do break into very small groups and some groups will operate inside the circle, enemy circle, and some operate outside the enemy circle, in order to break up the enemy's strategy. And that's how the guerilla strategy has been successful over the last fourteen years, against the Indonesians. Of course, the Indonesians are supported by the Air Force, the Navy, and so forth and the constant bombardment, of course.

MARK AARONS: But there's also an underground political network in East Timor. On his trip there last month, Mark Baker learned something of its operations.

MARK BAKER: There are, in fact, some links between more radical youth elements and the mainstream guerilla movement but I think more than that, there's a common sentiment, and nationalist sentiment amongst the Timorese which is driving this and the thing that Jakarta is realising now is that while they might well have contained Fretilin in the jungles, and it's a manageable irritant, but certainly one which continues to tie up thousands of soldiers. But what they're now confronting is that a new generation is growing up in Timor which is just as strong willed and just as strongly opposed to Indonesian control of the territory. The strong sense everywhere was that there is great sympathy with the guerillas, that they are people who are going through pretty tough conditions and personal deprivation to stand up and keep alive a cause which has, as far as I could judge, quite universal appeal. It is said by a lot of people that even Timorese up to some of the highest levels in the administration, are privately and personally unhappy with the situation, want change, and certainly resent the overwhelming domination of the territory, its economy and its administration by Indonesians.

ABEL GUTTERAS: The clandestine organisation is operating in all levels, from the top government departments down to the very village level, specially the Governor's department, within the military departments. It is to be vigilant of how Indonesia operates its security apparatus, its espionage network and so forth, and to anticipate any military movement and so that the information can be channelled to the high command, to be able to plan counter offensives, that is, you know, in a military sense.

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MARK AARONS: Benny Murdani recently confirmed that this clandestine network operates at the highest levels of the Timorese Administration. Mark Baker explains.

MARK BAKER: Many people that I spoke to talked about this extraordinary meeting where, as a direct consequence of a big demonstration on January 17, in front of the American Ambassador, Murdani went to Dili in the first week of February and at this meeting, he called together the Governor, the regional leaders, prominent businessmen and so forth, and at this public meeting, he spoke at length about the growing level of unrest, and said that the military was ready to take resolute action, as he put it, to crush any further challenge to Indonesian control. In the meeting, amongst the many things that Murdani said, he actually, he said, 'We know that some of you are pro-Fretilin, we know that some of you are supporting the Fretilin fighters in the jungle'. He actually accused some of the regional officials of actually paying money to students to encourage them to protest and so forth, and he said, 'We know who you are and we can deal with you if you don't stop'. But, as I say, many people were talking about this meeting around the town, but it was only later in my visit that I became aware that someone had taken a private tape recording of the meeting and I was able, through one of the people I met anonymously, to get a copy of it.

BENNY MURDANI: We must strive for unity, despite our differences. Of course there are people who are dissatisfied and choose another way. That's not forbidden, that's not forbidden. It's the right of citizens to express their opinion, but I remind you, citizens also have obligations and if there's a movement to create your own nation and it becomes strong enough, it will be crushed by the armed forces. And if we are defeated once, we will try a second time, or a third time. There have been bigger rebel movements and more widespread dissident opinions than the little group that calls itself Fretilin and we completely destroyed all those other groups. I repeat, we completely destroyed them.

MARK BAKER: I was told that, in fact, the day after this Murdani meeting, thousands of troops were brought into the town in a quite obvious, intimidatory show of strength. One person told me, watching columns of soldiers marching six abreast down one of the main roads into town, past his house, and he said that the procession went on for fifteen or twenty minutes. There were a lot of troops came in vehicles; he said a couple of ships arrived in the harbour and unloaded troops, and all for no apparent reason beyond the obvious way in which it was interpreted by everyone as a reinforcement of the line that Murdani had taken in his meeting, saying you people had better toe the line, or else.

[Singing, followed by recitation of a prayer.]

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MARK AARONS: That's Monsignor Martinho de Costa Lopes, the former Bishop of East Timor. In a country where 80 percent of the people are Catholics, the church's role has been crucial in focusing attention on Indonesian abuses. As a result, Monsignor Lopes was replaced a few years ago by Bishop Carlos Belo. Peter Philp explains the background.

PETER PHILP: Archbishop Lopes told me when he was in Melbourne some years ago, there were three stages in his life. There was the stage where he didn't want to become involved. He was a spiritual leader and the political side had nothing to do with him. When he saw his people being abused and raped and their rights absolutely ignored, he then realised that he had a military government there and so you deal in military terms. So therefore, very diplomatically, you go and sit privately with the army commanders and you express your concerns. He said when that didn't work, he said I changed dramatically and I went out on the streets and marched and demonstrated with my people.

The appointment of Bishop Belo was so unpopular that the story goes that some seminarians went outside of the courtyard - they boycotted the actual ceremony where he was created Bishop, and played basketball in the yard outside the church, that's how bad the Timorese felt. Today, I don't know of any Timorese clergyman that is not 100 percent behind him. You see, he, like Romero, like Lopes, like Helder Camarra, has been radicalised by the poverty of his people. I had three fairly intensive interviews with him and he was very very blunt with me about the situation. He spoke about his country being crippled, or being assassinated, both culturally, because the authorities were trying to destroy the Timorese culture and then blatantly, they were trying to destroy the country by abusing human rights. I mean, he was probably as blunt as any Bishop that I have ever spoken to in the third world.

PAUL MOORE: We did speak to Bishop Belo because he was already known to be exposed, in terms of his sympathy and his antipathy to the Indonesian Government. You may remember, he wrote a letter to the United Nations about a year ago, asking that the UN insist on a referendum, so that the Timorese people could decide who would govern them and ever since then, he has been persona non grata, not only with the government but with some forces within the church. The Bishop and others there feel that at least the hope of independence is the only thing that keeps the spirit of his people alive and therefore, it is in a sense of a vision, a vision for the people who are so beleaguered in many other ways.

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And this is the reason, I feel, that the Bishop feels he must speak with the voice of those people who at least want a chance to vote for independence, even though it may seem hopeless to the outsider. And knowing something about people, something about the vocation of Bishops, I feel very very supportive of him. I think he must speak with the voice of his people. It is 80 percent Roman Catholic in East Timor, he is their pastor, their prophet, and I admire tremendously his courage that he would be willing to take this stand and I think he has every right and in fact, obligation, to do so.

MARK AARONS: Bishop Paul Moore. Shirley Shackleton also believes that Bishop Belo speaks for his people. She was present last October at the Pope's Mass at Tacitolo near Dili.

SHIRLEY SHACKLETON: I saw the whole mass as a protest, from beginning to end. I mean, for me it was an extremely uplifting thing to see, but not because of anything the Pope did, because of the people. For example, they were issued with small flags, the red and white Indonesian flags, and told that they were to take those to the mass and they were to wave those enthusiastically at all times. I've got dozens of photographs and the only people holding those flags were Indonesians. When I got there, for instance, a lot of people wept all day actually, because Tacitolo is one of the places where the worst massacres took place, and they said things to me like, 'We are standing on the bones of our children', or, 'We are standing on the bones of our friends'. They were all very conscious of that.

What was also very interesting was when the Pope was actually arriving, there was a priest who was sort of getting the people all ready for the big ovation when the Pope was to arrive, and he started calling out, 'For Pope John Paul II', and the crowd yelled, 'Viva'. I mean, in unison, this was a crowd of people, don't know each other, they've come from all over Timor, this instant 'Viva'. Then he called out, 'For the Catholic Church', and they again, 'Viva', and then he called out, 'For East Timor', and you should have heard it. I mean, it was electric. I was jumping up and down. I had things going up and down my spine but I didn't notice any of the journalists getting that or seeing that, no. And I've read all the accounts - no-one's commented on that. To me, that was a very significant part of the resistance, you see. They were telling anybody who had the nous to hear that they were cheering for their own country.

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And so, there were things like that all day that happened. For instance, when the Pope made his speech, he spoke in English, for the press. Immediately Bishop Belo translated it into Tetum, for the mass. At the end of each little paragraph, the great 'Viva' went up, except at the end, where he said that they must reconcile. There was an absolute deathly silence. Now I couldn't believe it was happening. That huge number of people were as one, not only when it came to saying 'Viva' but when it came to not saying 'Viva', when they were told by the Pope, you must reconcile your differences, there was total silence.

MARK AARONS: Perhaps this explains Indonesia's hysteria following Bishop Belo's letter to the United Nations. He'd asked for an independent referendum to determine the people's real wishes.

PETER PHILIP: I think the big issue at the moment, is to follow the letter of Bishop Belo. Bishop Belo is saying to the United Nations, we want to have an independent referendum. If the people choose to be integrated into Indonesia, the issue is over as far as I am concerned. If they want to talk about autonomy with Indonesia or with Portugal, then that's another issue. If they want independence, then we need to talk seriously about is that in fact, feasible. I think the big issue now is to follow that up and to make sure there is a referendum because then we will have no doubt as to how the people really feel. At the moment, because of the security, because of the division, because of the lack of communications - absolutely no communication in and out of that country - we will never know honestly, how the people feel.

Now, that's not going to happen, because the Bishop has been belittled and sadly, there's been international silence. I think there's been one Dutch Bishop, a couple of Portuguese Bishops, that have stood up and said, 'We support Bishop Belo', and while there is silence, the Bishop will continue to be belittled and nothing is going to happen. So I think we've got to break the sound of silence. It's right on our doorstep, we have had historical connections with it, and we do have responsibility because our government has chosen mineral resources over the well-being of the Timorese people. I am wondering whether three governments - Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke - would have had a different opinion had it not been for security pacts and the fact that there are valuable minerals which we both want to share, in the Timorese Sea.

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MARK AARONS: Peter Philp. The recently signed Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia, has again focused attention on Canberra's Timor policy. The treaty has been condemned by Portugal. They're threatening to take Australia to the International Court of Justice to determine the treaty's validity.

Sasha Stepan is a tutor in politics at Monash University, where she studied the legal background of the treaty.

SASHA STEPAN: I really do see the signing of the Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia as being a rather flagrant violation of the rights of the East Timorese people. By signing the Timor Gap Treaty, Australia is condoning the continual denial of self determination of the East Timorese people. Now, I find the treaty rather ironic because back in the '70s, we were always being told there was no way East Timor could be a viable independent state because it was not able to be economically independent. This is all very ironic now, when we see Australia and Indonesia eagerly signing a treaty to enable them to exploit the oil in the Timor Gap, and when we look at the potential resources in the Timor Gap, optimistic forecasts have estimated that it could be twice the potential of Bass Strait. When we look at this resource potential, we can see that East Timor, in fact, far from being economically unviable, might in fact, have the potential to be like Brunei or a small Arab state, very small, yet still independent and extremely economically successful.

Now, the problems with the treaty, that I see, are the following. First and foremost, Portugal is still recognised by the United Nations as being the administering power of East Timor. East Timor is still seen to be a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations, and in fact, Australia is alone among the industrialised countries, in recognising the illegal annexation of the East Timorese territory, and it's important to note that none of the European Community states have recognised the annexation and they all support Portugal, in Portugal's stand on the issue. Both the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council are on the record, numerous times, as denouncing the annexation of East Timor as being illegal. So what we have here is Indonesia purporting to sign a treaty with Australia regarding the resources in the Timor Gap, but the only grounds they have for signing this treaty is their annexation, which has been deemed to be illegal. The illegality of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor breaches numerous aspects of international law - first and foremost, Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force in international relations. Also of interest is a 1970 declaration by the United Nations called the Definition of Aggression and this was signed by Australia and it explicitly bars the recognition of territory that has been acquired by force, so if we extrapolate that to this situation, it means that Australia is barred from recognising Indonesia's illegal annexation of East Timor.

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MARK AARONS: These points of international law may well be debated before the International Court of Justice. The Portuguese Government is reportedly committed to taking a case against Australia, to challenge the validity of the treaty, but our government will push the treaty through Parliament in the upcoming session. So how does Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, justify this policy?

GARETH EVANS: Well, it remains to be seen whether there are any resources there and it will certainly require a massive injection of capital, in an exploration program, to determine whether there is anything there. You need to appreciate that a Timor Gap Treaty is not just a treaty about resource exploitation. It is about trying to resolve a protracted argument between the two countries, about where to draw the sea boundary line. It was a situation that could not be left unresolved forever. It would simply be for traditional political and diplomatic strategic reasons, had to be the subject of some kind of negotiated settlement. The particular settlement that we came up with is one that has made it possible, in a very co-operative way, to engage in joint exploration for whatever resource may prove to be there, in that particular area of the sea bed, and I simply put it in that context.

It was not a cynical exercise, as some people have claimed, in getting into some kind of deal with the Indonesians, in order to achieve an economic advantage. It was simply a reflection of the reality that we'd acknowledged Indonesian sovereignty, and a reflection of the pressures imposed by our bilateral relationship, to try and find a solution to a long standing border disagreement between our two countries. The benefit of that will flow back to Indonesia and from the Indonesian Government indirectly, presumably to the people of East Timor, and they will benefit in that way. But to try and say that there's something special about the Timor Gap Treaty is to miss the point, that the Timor Gap Treaty is simply a corollary of the larger relationship between our two countries, that I've described earlier on. The recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor was not driven, I repeat, by our desire to get access to those resources. The sequence of events historically, and every other way, was the converse, in the process, advancing the relationship - the bilateral relationship between the two countries - to the point where we now, I think, can exercise much more real influence in terms of the way in which the government reacts to its East Timorese citizens now, than was the case than when we were standing back and shouting at each other. And that's really the bottom line, I guess, of the Australian position, it's an attempt constructively, to move things forward rather than wistfully, to recreate a piece of history that we all wish hadn't happened.